

RESEARCH NOTE

Violence and How to Recognize Perceptual Bias Reflections on Twenty Years of Research

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I HAVE A CLEAR memory of my visit in January 1991 to Aum Shinrikyō's headquarters in Fujinomiya City, Shizuoka Prefecture. I was accompanying a reporter from a weekly magazine on a trip to collect information, but I hoped to observe and get a feeling for the atmosphere within the group. I recall that immediately upon entering the building, there was a distinctive smell. Even though I had visited numerous religious organizations and am acquainted with many religious figures, I gradually realized that the feeling within Aum was something different.

My visit was around the time that Jōyū Fumihiro was performing the “underground *samadhi*” (entering a sealed space underground and practicing meditation there for several days). A number of people were in a tent watching a computer screen, closely monitoring the oxygen and carbon dioxide in Jōyū's underground chamber.

At that time, Asahara Shōkō and some of his top disciples were giving an interview for a different weekly magazine. Asahara placed his hand on the forehead of a young girl who appeared to be in her middle teens, demonstrating

*This article is a translation of “20 nenkan no ankēto chōsa kara kangaeru: ‘bōryoku’ to ‘ninchibaiasu’ ni dō kizuku ka: Aum jiken ga tou mono” 20年間のアンケート調査から考える—「暴力」と「認知バイアス」にどう気づくか—オウム事件が問うもの— (*Chuō Kōron* 132: 144–51). Footnotes have been added by the translator.

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the performance of *shakutīpatto*.¹ The building had been built by hand by his disciples, and there were cardboard boxes stacked around the room. Rats and cockroaches were crawling about. There were some young disciples engaged in meditation, but rather than a feeling of calm and quiet, I remember feeling that a dark mood was flowing through the space.

I was traveling with a photojournalist, and in the bullet train on the return trip I realized that Niimi Tomomitsu was sitting a few rows behind us.² But when I spoke to him and offered him a canned coffee drink, he silently turned away. His expression also was dark. I meant to speak to him again when we reached Tokyo Station, but he had disappeared.

Several of Asahara's disciples were included in the interview, and, regardless of the subject being discussed, I had a strong sense of their intimate bond as master and manager-disciples (*kanbu shinja* 幹部信者). But in comparison with other religious groups, it did not seem so terribly distinctive.

When I learned in March 1997 that the Fujinomiya headquarters was to be destroyed, I quickly put together a research team, secured the necessary permissions, and went out to document whatever was there. Seeing that the bulldozers were poised to raze the buildings, I looked for anything that might provide information. From the ruins of several of the buildings (called *satiyan*) that had been destroyed, I was able to understand what Aum had been using as teaching materials.

Beside the narrow beds for the followers, I found stacks of audio tapes of Asahara's sermons. His photo was pasted up everywhere, so as to burn his face into the brain. If a person spent several years in such a place, the memory of it would never be erased. Looking back on it now, it would take an immense effort for believers to deny their past way of life, to realize that they had joined a misguided religious organization, or that they had been deceived by Asahara.

Evidence for Considering the Aum Problem

As a scholar of religion, I have been asked many times since the March 1995 sarin gas incident why such a thing happened. Even though I can only answer based on what I have been able to find, I must make clear how I arrived at my opinion. Knowing that a single individual can only accomplish a limited amount,

1. Asahara Shōkō 麻原彰晃 (1955–2018) was the founder of Aum Shinrikyō. *Shakutīpatto* (シヤクテイパット; from the Sanskrit *śaktipāta*), is the ritual transfer of spiritual energy from a guru to a disciple.

2. Niimi Tomomitsu 新実智光 (1964–2018), was one of the Aum leaders who had been with Asahara since the founding of Aum's predecessor group, Aum Shinsen no Kai オウム神仙の会, founded in 1986. He was executed for his participation in the Tokyo sarin gas attack and other crimes carried out by Aum.

I decided to work together with researchers from the Religious Information Research Center (RIRC, established in 1998) using the data that I had acquired at the *satiyans* as well as data that researchers had compiled previously. In addition, I also sought to understand how younger generations understood this incident, how they had reacted, and what they thought about it.

As it happened, a large-scale, joint research project by the Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society and Kokugakuin University's Institute for the Study of Japanese Culture and Classics was beginning a survey of students' religious attitudes in April 1995. Several thousand students across Japan were surveyed on twelve occasions, continuing until 2015. The first survey came too soon after the event to include questions about it, but from the second survey in 1996, we included questions about Aum Shinrikyō each year.

The results of the study undertaken with the cooperation of RIRC researchers were compiled in two books (INOUE 2011; 2015). We investigated videos made by Aum Shinrikyō, Asahara's taped sermons, many magazines and books published by the group, as well as the teaching materials used by believers, trying to grasp what kind of worldview believers embraced. We believed that at the bare minimum, in order to understand why such an incident occurred, we must stand face to face with the things that believers must have encountered with their five senses.

Listening to audio tapes made for believers, we assume that Asahara's sermons must have seemed skillful to them. Also, we learned that different sermons were created for children of different age groups, for primary school pupils, middle school students, and so forth. There was even one tape titled "Animal Psychology," which consisted entirely of music. Among the videos, there was one that included scenes dwelling on the fear of death. As I looked into these materials, I pondered the question of how they differed from sermons at a Buddhist temple or a Christian church.

To name one point on which they differ from increasingly formalized religions, I think that the difference lies in a stance that seeks to unify teaching and practice in everyday life. However, there was a very large contradiction between Asahara's actions and what he preached, but that only became known later. Many believers must have thought that Asahara's words and actions were consistent, and also that he possessed a kind of supernatural power.

For about half a year after the sarin gas incident on the subway, the media reported daily on Aum Shinrikyō. Thereafter, the reporting decreased, but any related news was reported. Thus, I thought it would be important to investigate what kind of image younger generations formed of Aum Shinrikyō as they encountered these numerous media reports, because I found that impressions of Aum Shinrikyō differed significantly by generation. For people above a certain age, it seemed to me that their reaction was largely, "That's not a religion. That's

a bogus group.” But I could also see from the younger generations’ reactions that Aum evoked a kind of interest.

The research mentioned above was published in February 2018 (INOUE 2018). This work analyzes the responses to questions about Aum Shinrikyō. We can see from changes in the reporting on Aum Shinrikyō that even now students have a certain level of concern about the group. If we combine the responses saying, “I have a great deal of concern” with “I am somewhat concerned,” we find that 60 to 70 percent of respondents report some level of concern. It is especially notable that this level of concern has remained almost unchanged from 1997 to 2015 (TABLE 1).

Needless to say, the content or substance of concern has changed, and, for several years after the incident, concern for the outcome of the trials that were in progress was declining. These results are probably related to the courts’ confirmation of the verdicts, one after the other. We find about one-third of respondents showing concern for the victims of the sarin gas incident, and this level does not change significantly.

Even in 2015, about 90 percent responded that they were aware of Aum’s complicity in the event. But only about 53 percent were aware that Aleph is the successor group to Aum Shinrikyō, and only 44 percent that Circle of Light (Hikari no Wa ひかりの輪) was formed by Jōyū Fumihiro following a schism from Aleph.³ It may be that, with reporting on the executions of the death sentences, the number of people who are aware of these things has increased.

We can only gain a superficial understanding on the basis of opinion polling, but I would like to refer once again to the results seen right after the event, in 1996. We asked, “What do you think of the people who joined Aum?” Thirty-one percent responded, “I cannot understand the actions of people who joined such a religion at all.” On the other hand, some 36 percent responded, “I can understand their feeling of wanting to join to some extent.” A little less than 3 percent responded, “I might have joined,” but the number of students who felt some degree of empathy was not insignificant.

Locating the Problem

When twelve manager-disciples of a group receive the death penalty, we cannot help but focus on the question of how they came to join Aum and why they became involved in their crimes. But if we hope to learn from the Aum inci-

3. Jōyū Fumihiro 上祐史浩 (b. 1962), one of Asahara’s top lieutenants, served as the group’s spokesman until a few months after the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system. Subsequently he founded Hikari no Wa. The members of Aum Shinrikyō who remained after the sarin gas incident and police investigation took the name Aleph アレフ in 2000. Jōyū founded Hikari no Wa, also known as The Circle of Rainbow Light, in 2007 as a breakaway from Aleph.

TABLE 1. Knowledge of Aum Shinrikyō.

		2005	2010	2012	2015
1	It caused the subway sarin gas incident in 1995.	96.4	90.5	88.7	89.2
2	The founder's name was Asahara Shōkō (given name: Matsumoto Chizuo).	94.3	82.9	79.9	81.7
3	The group is now called Aleph.	62.1	41.5	41.2	53.1
4	Aum claimed that it is possible to acquire the supernatural power of levitation through spiritual practice.	76.7	51.3	50.6	62.3
5	The buildings where believers undertook spiritual practice were called <i>satyan</i> .	59.5	21.5	24.2	31.6
6	Jōyū Fumihiro founded Circle of Light (Hikari no Wa).	--	26.1	29.8	43.7
7	Aum founded the Party of Truth (Shinri no tō), and some leaders ran for election to the lower house of the Diet.	--	--	--	42.5

Source: Based on INOUE (2018). The figures in the table are percentages.

dent, it is no simple matter to decide who and what to concentrate on. There were many believers who were convicted of crimes, even if they did not receive the death penalty. We have the example of Jōyū Fumihiro, who is already out of jail and who has already founded the new religious group Hikari no Wa. There are believers involved both in Aleph and Hikari no Wa. We may assume that there are former Aum members who secretly support these groups. There are other former Aum members who for one reason or another left the group either before or after the incident. We presume that Niimi, even after being sentenced to death, went to his execution still not believing that he had taken the wrong path. On the other hand, there is the example of Nakagawa Tomomasa, who has expressed his feelings of guilt.⁴

Why would people who had such high levels of education, and moreover were well versed in the physical sciences, join Aum Shinrikyō? Why would they, who joined to help others, wound and kill so many people whom they had no reason to hate? Even if we limit ourselves to this question, it is difficult to know where to focus, and this becomes true the more one reads the relevant documents.

We could attribute Asahara's influence to ignorance of the depth of Vajrayana teaching, the problems of the closed spaces of the *satians*, the spiritual distress of individual believers, or the evident problems of society at that time. However,

4. Nakagawa Tomomasa 中川智正 (1962–2018), formerly a high-ranking leader within Aum Shinrikyō, was sentenced to death for his role in manufacturing the sarin gas used in Aum's attacks.

we cannot say which of these is the main cause. We are too likely to look for an explanation along the lines of the commentators. The causes must have operated along differing vectors with multiple causes in the case of each Aum believer.

There are numerous people who followed the Aum event and observed many court sessions as auditors, but the more deeply these people consider the problem, they say, the more they feel lost. But isn't that natural? Rarely can we find a person who wraps up an issue at a single stroke, but one cannot help but doubt how deeply they have considered the issues. No matter how one deals with examples drawn from research on behavior and the mind, we cannot expect to get to the bottom of the problem through analysis so long as we position ourselves on the outside, as if it were someone else's problem.

Yet even so, we cannot turn our backs on the question of whether or not we can draw some lessons from the Aum incident. Here, I would like to discuss two things.

First, no matter how a religious organization is founded, depending on physical and spiritual conditions, violence can occur. Considering the history of this phenomenon, there are countless examples. We are attentive to Aum because of its murders and indiscriminate terrorism, but there are various other examples from contemporary Japanese religions. I have been part of RIRC's information gathering on contemporary religions for twenty years, and examples on a larger or smaller scale are occurring daily. These include murders in the name of prayer rituals (*kitō* 祈祷), tax evasion, coercive sales of religious items, high-pressure tactics to force people to join a religion, and so on. There are also religious groups who will raise "slap" lawsuits (frivolous lawsuits, intimidating lawsuits) against researchers or lawyers who criticize these activities. In order to stifle criticism, these lawsuits adopt the strategy of seeking enormous amounts of money in compensation. Aum Shinrikyō used to dangle the threat of these lawsuits as a way to silence its critics, and it also fought a number of actual cases.

My second point is that society's basic knowledge about religion is too limited, and that it is subject to perceptual bias. The most conspicuous example is the fact that we are deceived by the high educational level of the Aum manager-disciples and the notion that many of them belonged to the elite.

Furthermore, there are few opportunities in the present-day Japanese education system to nurture the power of judgment regarding the dangers inherent in religion. After the Aum incident, there were those who asserted the necessity of moral education or education to cultivate sensitivity to religion. To a certain extent, these claims are appropriate. However, in our present social conditions there seems little hope that they would be effective. The reason is a lack of suitable teachers. Most teachers are already too busy and have no time to learn basic knowledge about contemporary religions.

Even if teachers possess this knowledge to some extent, it is all too easy for the bias of certainty to come into play, claiming that “I alone” would not make a wrong choice even if others did, or making claims in a framework governed by what you think you would do if by chance you had created a religion. We must be attentive to these human weaknesses of perception.

The Necessity of Intuition and Media Literacy

So what should we do? The first task is to improve our literacy concerning information on religion. Of course, this is equally necessary for researchers. There are limitations on our ability to study each newly formed religion or religious phenomenon. We can only make use of various kinds of information provided by the media. However, there are many instances of perceptual bias in broadcasts. And now in the age of the internet, there is immeasurably more information that mixes truth and lies than before. For these reasons it is imperative that we improve our literacy concerning both religion and the media.

The examples in which researchers on religion have been mistaken in their judgment of Aum’s actions have been pointed out repeatedly. There is no doubt that these researchers who have been criticized were naive. But we cannot let the matter go at that. Even if a researcher believes that he or she is conducting research from an objective standpoint, there is a tendency to adopt an affirmative attitude towards the object of one’s research, and this is because the bias of certainty operates so that we see only what is convenient to ourselves. For this reason, it may be that researchers are more likely even than ordinary people to adopt a biased perspective in their judgment of religious organizations.

If this is the situation even for researchers, then if people with limited knowledge of religion are approached or solicited by someone who appears to be connected with a religious organization, it will be difficult to know what to do. The number of researchers who regard the Aum issue as a problem of “cults” has increased somewhat, and this is one perspective that is natural if we think about how to manage risk.

The phenomenon of solicitation, inviting others to join one’s religious organization, arises from the natural tendency, not limited to religion, to desire the recognition of others. But unlike an invitation to take up a hobby, religion exerts a broad and deep influence on a person’s way of life and has the potential to change a person completely, for good or ill. For this reason, when solicited by a religious organization, one’s intuition is very important. One important factor in judging the situation is the question, “Is the person truly inviting me for my sake, or is he or she just trying to draw me in?” According to one theory of developmental psychology, the human mind has a module for identifying betrayers.

We are living in an age in which we must exercise our power to identify deceit even when it comes to religion.

At the same time, however, intuition has its limitations. If in doubt, seek out reliable information. With the proliferation of information in contemporary society, younger generations have far fewer opportunities than in the past to learn about religion from family or in their communities. How can we nurture the ability to make appropriate judgments about religion in the midst of such an extremely diverse religious world? Because there is an infinite expanse of information about religion in magazines, on television, and on the internet, people who have not thought deeply about religion imagine that these are the right places to go.

It is also important to make an effort to seek out reliable books on religion. Books based on regular surveys in which the author has striven to provide reliable information can be somewhat—even very—difficult to read. But if you find a reliable study, read it more than once. This may be a high hurdle for a generation relying on information drawn from television, the internet, and social media, but in a world of so much dreadful information all around us, and with so many new religious and spiritual groups, it is difficult to know which ones may be dangerous. Very little of the information on the internet or available over smart-phones is systematic or has been carefully considered.

There is no way to predict when a serious problem concerning religion might arise around us. It is frequently the case that once such a problem occurs, there is no time for careful thinking, and it can become impossible to make a level-headed judgment. Whether it is a matter of the bias of certainty or the bias of self-righteousness, these factors that have arisen in the course of human evolution are difficult to avoid. In particular, in literacy regarding religion, it is very important not to forget that one's judgment can be twisted by changing circumstances and is not always reliable.

[Translated by Helen Hardacre]

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